



**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)**

Hearing on “Seeking Justice and Freedom in Belarus”

Tuesday, September 21, 2021

2:30 p.m.

Room 419, Dirksen Senate Office Building

Opening Statement of Helsinki Commission Chairman Sen. Ben Cardin

More than a year ago, the self-described “Last Dictator of Europe” Alexander Lukashenko stole the presidential election in Belarus. Despite well-documented cases of voter intimidation and election fraud, Lukashenko claimed he won in a landslide. In response, a record number of citizens came out to peacefully protest the falsification of the election and their dissatisfaction with the regime.

Belarusians from all walks of life—including employees of government-run companies, schools and hospitals, numerous women, and even groups of senior citizens—took part in these protests. The scale of the protests were truly unprecedented, especially considering Lukashenko’s long history of brutally suppressing dissent. Many of us remember dramatic videos in which military and police dropped their riot shields and truncheons to join protestors.

In another country, this outpouring of popular discontent may have led to new elections. However, Lukashenko turned to the Kremlin for financial and media support to buttress his faltering rule, choosing to widen the chasm between citizens and authorities. Through mass arrests, detention conditions amounting to torture, and most shockingly, a brazen hijacking of a



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civilian airliner to kidnap a regime critic, Lukashenko is hellbent on clinging to power at any cost.

His brutality has spurred numerous efforts to support grassroots democracy in Belarus. Many Belarusians fled the country and now face the daunting task of dislodging the dictator from abroad. Leading this movement is Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Lukashenko's exiled main challenger in the presidential election.

The United States—along with the EU, Canada, and the UK—has demonstrated our support for the people of Belarus by imposing sanctions on Lukashenko's regime. The United States re-imposed sanctions on nine state-owned companies in Belarus and introduced new sanctions on individuals and key sectors of the Belarusian economy, including state-owned enterprises.

As a cosponsor of S. Res. 345, introduced on the first anniversary of Lukashenko's fraudulent elections, I joined my Helsinki Commission colleagues to monitor the situation and reassert our commitment to supporting a free Belarus. I had the pleasure of meeting with Ms. Tsikhanouskaya here on the Hill this summer and look forward to continuing the conversation about a more effective response to the crisis in Belarus with our witnesses today.

Our first witness, joining us in person, is Serge Kharytonau, a media expert and analyst with the International Strategic Action Network for Security (iSANS). Joining us by video is Tatsiana Khomich, the Coordination Council's Representative for political prisoners and the



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Coordinator of former presidential candidate Viktor Babaryka's team. She is also the sister of political prisoner Maria Kalesnikava.

Also on screen is David Kramer, a Senior Fellow at Florida International University, former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, and DAS for European and Eurasian Affairs, and a former Helsinki Commissioner. Finally, we have Siarhej Zikratski, who works in the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as her Representative on Legal Affairs. I look forward to hearing from each of you.